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WIC'S Guide for Retailers

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

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Program
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WHAT IS WIC?

WIC stands for the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children. It provides nutritious foods to supplement the diets of pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women; infants; and children under age 5. In addition, WIC offers participants an incentive to get health care and an opportunity to learn the relationship between nutrition and good health. Eligibility for the program is based on low income and nutritional need which is identified by a health professional.

WHAT ROLE DO RETAILERS PLAY IN THE WIC PROGRAM?

Most WIC participants receive "food instruments" to exchange for foods at approved retail grocery stores. The form of the food instruments varies from State to State; they may be coupons or vouchers or checks. The food instruments are like prescriptions for specific foods to meet a participant's individual nutritional needs. And the retail clerk helps fill the prescription by making sure the participant receives exactly what is prescribed. Since WIC food prescriptions are designed to reduce complications of pregnancy due to poor nutrition and to promote the healthiest possible birth, growth, and development of children, the retailer role in the program is a vital one.

HOW DOES THE WIC PROGRAM HELP A RETAILER'S BUSINESS?

The WIC program can make a substantial contribution to food sales. In an evaluation of the WIC program, some participating retailers estimated that about 30 percent of their sales of WIC-type foods are due to the WIC program. The cooperation of retailers allows the program to operate through the regular food marketing system.

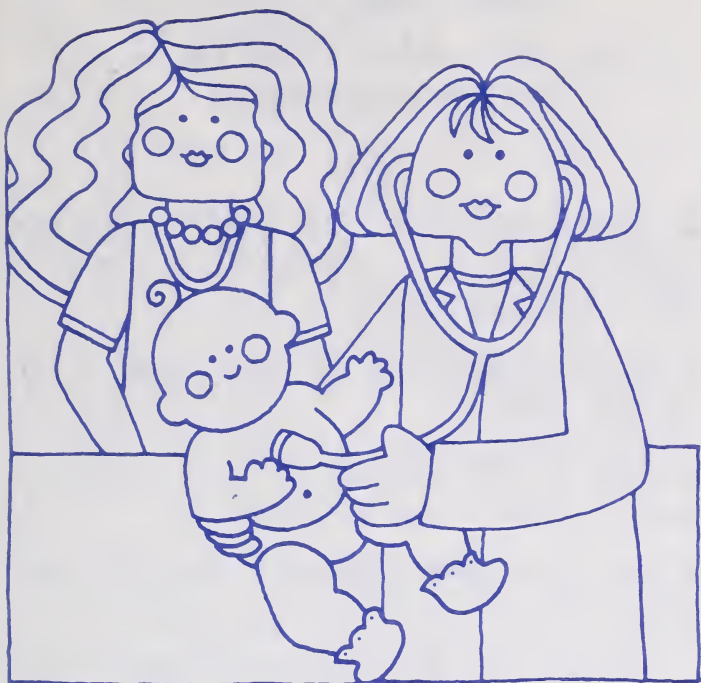
WHAT FOODS DO WIC CUSTOMERS "BUY" WITH FOOD INSTRUMENTS?

WIC customers exchange food instruments for specified quantities of a food item. WIC foods include cereals, juices, infant formula, infant cereal, milk, eggs, and other products that are high in specific nutrients. Only certain brands of some of these foods meet the program's strict nutrient requirements. The State or local agency will provide retailers with an up-to-date list of the authorized brands of acceptable foods.

WHAT INFORMATION IS ON A FOOD INSTRUMENT?

Although the information on food instruments may vary from State to State, it will probably include:

- The first and last dates a WIC customer may use the food instrument to get WIC foods.
- The date by which the retailer must submit the food instrument to receive payment.



- A serial number.
- The maximum dollar value of the food instrument.
- Blank spaces to fill in the date the food instrument is used, the value of the food bought with the food instrument, and the signature of the WIC customer. Store clerks should be trained to check the food instruments for all the necessary information and to help customers fill them in correctly.

HOW DO RETAILERS REDEEM FOOD INSTRUMENTS?

In some States, food instruments are checks which must be deposited before the expiration date. In others, they are vouchers which must be submitted to a State or local WIC agency before the expiration date. Retailers receive payment within 60 days of the date they submit vouchers.

WHO ADMINISTERS THE WIC PROGRAM?

WIC is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. FNS gives funds to State health departments and to federally recognized Indian tribes. They, in turn, administer the program through local health clinics and private nonprofit agencies. FNS provides guidelines for operating the program. Each State may develop its own system for operating the program within those guidelines.

WHAT DOES THE WIC PROGRAM EXPECT FROM PARTICIPATING RETAILERS?

Retailers must agree in writing to:

- Provide only the foods stated in program regulations.



- Provide these foods at the same prices charged non-WIC customers.
- Submit food instruments for payment within the allowable time limits.
- Accept food instruments from WIC participants only within allowable time limits.
- Not discriminate against any WIC participants because of their race, color, sex, or national origin.

In addition, retailers should:

- Stock sufficient amounts of authorized WIC foods.
- Teach store clerks how to handle WIC food instrument transactions.
- Have a current list of authorized WIC foods at each checkout counter.
- Call the State or local agency if problems occur.
- Encourage WIC customers to separate their WIC foods from the rest of their order and tell cashiers when they reach the checkout counter that they will be using WIC food instruments.

WHAT IS THE PENALTY FOR PROGRAM VIOLATIONS?

It is very important that retailers and clerks understand and follow program rules. Only through their cooperation can the WIC program succeed in giving nutritional help to the women and children who need it. Violations of the regulations work against the goals of the program and can result in a store's suspension from the program. Violations include:

- Giving participants cash, unauthorized foods, or other items instead of authorized foods.
- Charging the program for foods not received by the participants, or charging WIC customers more than other customers for the same food item.

WHAT HELP WILL RETAILERS GET FROM GOVERNMENT AGENCIES?

- The State agency will ensure that all of the following necessary information about the program is available:
 - A current copy of the written retailer agreement.
 - FNS guidelines and instructions.
 - An up-to-date list of the allowable WIC foods by brand name.
- The State or local agency will hold training sessions on handling food instruments.
- The State or local agency will reimburse claims within 60 days from the day food instruments are presented for payment.
- The State agency will provide an adequate procedure for an appeal if a retailer is suspended from the program.

The WIC program generally makes supplemental foods available to participating women, infants, and children through the regular food marketing system. This means that it contributes to food sales and relies on retailer cooperation for success. The result is better health for WIC participants.

For more information about the WIC program, contact the State or local health department.

The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children is open to all eligible persons regardless of race, sex, color, creed, or national origin.



WIC PROGRAM DOs AND DON'Ts FOR CASHIERS

DO

- Check the foods WIC customers buy against their food instruments and the list of allowable foods.
- Help customers fill out their food instruments.
- Ask a WIC customer for an identification card if one is required.
- Get a countersignature if one is required.
- Make sure the food instrument has all information required by the State agency.

DON'T

- Substitute other foods for authorized WIC foods.
- Provide less food than the instrument states.
- Accept expired food instruments.
- Accept food instruments for credit or charge accounts.
- Charge WIC customers more than other customers.
- Knowingly exchange WIC foods for cash.

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